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THE COST OF LIVING AND HOUSEHOLD MANAGEMENT

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Those who study the cost of living among wage earners—the class where it means most—must always be amazed by the different results obtained in different households from an equal wage. Again and again, one finds two families side by side, the men of equal earning capacity, equal steadiness, yet one lives in disorder, badly fed, badly clothed and shiftless, the other is always clean, food abundant and well cooked, clothes tidy and a nest-egg in the savings bank. Study the two cases and you will find, not necessarily, a shiftless and idle woman on the one side and an energetic one on the other. The intention and effort of the two women may be almost equal, but one has never been taught to cook, sew or care for a house, while the other has had a good training in all these things. The difference in results is the difference that comes from knowing and not knowing how to do a thing.

This observation is backed up by all the studies of wage earner's budgets which we have—those of Mrs. More, Mr. Chapin and of the state and federal labor bureaus and commissions. They all note the difference in results between the good and poor manager. The truth is the provider in the household is only one-half of the firm—the other half is the manager. The dollar badly spent is only half-a-dollar.

The rise in the cost of living becomes acute in the wage-earning class, largely in proportion to the kind of management which the wages receive. As a rule the price rises faster than the wage—now this can only be met by management. It is disastrous to try to meet it by sending the mother to work. Her wage can never make up what is lost by careless housekeeping.

There are three points in household management which seem to me to be weak in all classes:

I. The first of these is the matter of selection and substitution. Largely because of ignorance of food values certain articles of diet are considered indispensable whatever their price. The fact that demand keeps up through scarcity makes it possible for the dealer to lift his price still higher. There are few if any articles of food for which substitutes can not be found, but you must not only know them, but you must know how to use them. Rice, dried fruit, salted fish, stews, soups and chowders are a house-wife's weapon against exorbitant prices, caused either by scarcity or by manipulation. One likes his morning egg, but if you refuse to eat it at 50 cents a dozen you have done something to bring the price down to reason, and if enough of us refuse, down it will come. This has been proved again and again this winter in different cities through the activities of the Housekeeper's League. Don't buy the thing which is lifting the cost of your living beyond your limit—select something else. This is meeting the cost of living with brains—this means an unwillingness to succumb to the circumstance of prices.

II. The cost of living is kept up, to a degree at least, by ignorance and careless purchasing—the ease with which the seller can put off on the buyer underweight and adulterations. It is obvious that if we had had in the country a race of careful and intelligent buyers it would never have been possible for the false-weight man or the adulterator to have come to flower. He has been made by us—the buyers. We have been fertile soil for him, nor can the best law and the best inspection ever devised up-root him—it is the educated watchful purchaser alone that can spoil his business. It is a race of women who know when they have full weight and whose civic consciences are developed to the point of protest, when they don't get it, that will put an end to the manufacturing and use of false measures. It is only such women who can end adulteration in food and cloth. Already the pure food law is being evaded by clever tricks; and who is going to find these evasions out promptly if consumers are too stupid to detect them, or detecting, too inert or conscienceless to report them? More intelligent consumers are what are needed to bring down the high cost of living in the household.

The matter of quality in clothing is of all importance in making a small income go far, but quality is one of the things we have lost an interest in—lost our sense of—and this fact helps not a little in

the long run to increase the cost of living. It is the cut and finish we seek. This is what makes it possible for the manufacturers to put over the substitutes for wool, for example, that he does. It looks right and we are too ignorant to know the difference. This submission to poor quality—if the effect is right, brings up the cost of living. What we really need to meet this is a crusade in the household in the interest of quality.

III. The third point at which the average household management aids in increasing the cost of living is its slowness in adapting itself to modern ideas. It insists on buying in small quantities and it insists in remaining a solitary unit. Wholesale and coöperative action is being applied to every industry. It is through this that the cost of production is brought down in many cases though not always as yet primarily perhaps because of over-capitalization, unnecessary overhead charges and general lack of scientific management. But in time, I believe, the cost of every necessity will be lowered by coöperative large-scale production. But if the purchaser remains too indolent to go directly to the source of supply for his goods—if he continues to buy in single pounds instead of by quantity—to act always alone as a purchaser supporting a succession of middlemen—of course his cost of living will remain high. I think it is no exaggeration to say that coal costs the poor, who buy it by the bushel, two and even three times what it does those who can buy it by the ton, but you rarely find a half-dozen families combining in buying a ton of coal and dividing it up. They don't know that it can be done. There is no reason why any group of individuals—the operatives in a factory town, the employees of a great shop—should not combine for purchasing. We have score of groups, societies, clubs, organizations of all kinds and for all purposes, that might use their machinery to instruct and aid their members in the value of coöperative buying though as yet this is being done only sporadically. It should be a principle of all household management, and will be I am convinced from the way women are beginning to tackle the matter.

As I look at it, scientific household management is of basic importance in handling the matter of the high cost of living. Unless the manager of the house, the buyer and user of what comes into it, is trained in purchasing, knows values, has a keen sense that it is her duty as a citizen not to be cheated, respects quality, has learned the possibilities of coöperation, she is not going to be able to meet

her individual problem. The cost of living will always get ahead of her. We may reform the tariff to the point of free trade, harness the trusts, so that they serve the public as well as they do themselves, reform the currency, increase production; but unskilled hands and brains will continue to work confusion in the household budget, the wage will never be equal to the demand, however cheap and abundant we may succeed in making necessities and even luxuries.

Housekeeping is a many sided business calling for training in theory and practice for scientific management. It needs as varied qualities as any business known to human beings and yet as things are now girls and women are getting only the most superficial and artificial training in it. It needs to be formulated and professionalized and every girl rich or poor should be taught at least its principles; at the same time she should be taught its relation to all economic and social problems and in particular to the problem of the cost of living.